



Articles

Islamic Fundamentalism in the Balkans

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The Jewish woman stood in the office of Bosnian president Alija Izetbegovic. She was distraught. She placed a handful of broken tiles on the desk in front of her and told the president's adviser, "It's a crime, a crime against culture. They are destroying a holy place, a place that is of incalculable value to Sarajevo."

"There's nothing we can do," the adviser replied sorrowfully. "They have the money and they are going to do what they want."

The most interesting aspect of this incident, which took place after the end of the Bosnian war in 1995, is that the temple the Jewish woman, an art expert named Zoja Finci, was attempting to protect was neither, as one might expect, a synagogue, nor a Serbian church. Rather, it was the Begova or Governor's mosque, the largest in the former Yugoslavia, and the main Islamic structure in Sarajevo.

Further, the presumptive vandals against whom Zoja Finci sought to protect the mosque were neither Serb extremists nor commercial developers. They were, in fact, just the sort of people one might have thought would target a synagogue or a Serb structure: Islamic officials backed by Saudi Arabia, engaged in a purported reconstruction.

The official Supreme Saudi Aid Committee occupies one of the largest governmental buildings in the Bosnian capital. The committee has paid for the rehabilitation of numerous mosques damaged during the 1992-95 war. But the aid is not always appreciated by ordinary Muslims, who, no less than art experts, have ways of expressing their resentments.

At the Alipasha mosque in Sarajevo, a lovely Ottoman structure with a slender, graceful minaret, only meters away from the committee's headquarters, the word "Saudi" has been scratched off the commemorative plaque announcing a donation for its restoration.

The problem is that the Saudis and their local agents are Wahhabis, followers of the main fundamentalist sect in the Islamic world. Wahhabis do not approve of Ottoman mosques. Their rehabilitation of the Imperial mosque, also in Sarajevo, turned what had been a beautiful, balanced complex of buildings, which seemed to invite entry, into something not much different from a parking garage in a Western city.

In October 1999, the Bosnian weekly *Dani* [Days] published an extremely

revealing interview with Kemal Zukic, director of the Center for Islamic Architecture in Sarajevo. The interviewer asked Zukic about the wall decorations in the Begova mosque—precisely the panels, the removal of which caused so much anguish to Zoja Finci. He answered, "There were several layers of paintings, so that in the end we were in a quandary about which layer merited preservation. . . . The biggest contribution came from a Saudi donor. . . . Parts remain but most of the walls are now blank."

Pressed as to whether the panels that were removed would be preserved, Zukic answered testily, "I find it really hard to get excited over decorations inside the mosque. We are not in a situation like the more fortunate European nations, such that we could preserve our cultural heritage. . . . That was only an internal decoration and it was not intended to last forever."

Zukic is a graduate in architecture from the University of Sarajevo who has never practiced that profession, but who has produced elaborate plans for new Bosnian mosques. According to one foreign expert who requested anonymity after an interview with Zukic, "His ideas for mosque design involve knockoffs of Saudi-modern shopping mall architecture with odd touches inspired by the décor of the Love Boat, including portholes! He is the very model of the modern zealot, narrow-minded, arrogant, and so dumb he doesn't even realize it."

But at least the Begova mosque's outer walls remained. Elsewhere in Bosnia-Herzegovina, the fundamentalists, away from urban critics, pursue a more aggressive tactic. *Dani* reported that Muslims in the rural town of Vrbovik were angry because they had understood funds had been donated for the reconstruction of their traditional, Ottoman mosque, which was on the front line and was destroyed in the 1992-95 war. But that money was diverted elsewhere, while two new mosques and six smaller prayer structures were erected in the Saudi style. The local Islamic cleric, Hadji Salih Avdukovic, commented angrily, "These people are hypocrites. They want to do everything from scratch."

Dani is a sensationalist organ, but in this instance its reportage was on the mark. Thanks to the seemingly inexhaustible financial resources of Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states, Wahhabis have appeared all over Bosnia-Herzegovina and Kosovo since the bloodshed ended. According to a September 9, 1999 news release by the Saudi Joint Relief Committee for Kosovo, out of four million Saudi riyals spent by the committee on the ground in Kosovo, nearly half was spent to sponsor 388 religious "propagators" (i.e., missionaries), with the intent of converting Kosovars to Wahhabi fundamentalism.

Another six hundred thousand riyals went for the reconstruction of thirty-seven mosques, and two hundred thousand riyals was spent on two schools. The amount of money involved was fairly modest (four million riyals is a little more than a million U.S. dollars), except when one considers that the Saudis had only been on the scene in Kosovo for a little over two months at that point. It was characteristic that a greater proportion of Saudi aid was spent on fundamentalist "propagators" and on mosque building than on broader humanitarian needs.

Mosque architecture is not the Wahhabis' only interest. Walking the streets

of Sarajevo, one might think they have gained considerable influence. Many young men wear "Islamic" beards, and numerous young women have adopted head and shoulder coverings, or *hijab*. The campus of the University of Sarajevo is especially notable for this habit, and a women's store with the amusing name "Hijab Boutique" opened near the old Ottoman market.

As the defaced plaque at the Alipasha mosque demonstrates, the fundamentalists are definitely unpopular with Balkan Muslims. In Sarajevo, *hijab* may be more a fad than anything else—and it certainly has not caught on in Kosovo, although many women wear Balkan head scarves.

There are other things that Balkan Muslims favor, but which Wahhabis disapprove. One is veneration of the dead. In Saudi Arabia itself, fundamentalists have, over the past two hundred years, destroyed all the tombs of the companions of the prophet Mohammed. In Kosovo, the Saudis offered to rebuild several mosques in the area of Vushtrri/Vucitrn, which were destroyed during the 1998-99 fighting. They promised the new mosques would be "better and more Islamic." But first, they said, the Albanian Muslims would have to uproot the Ottoman graveyards nearby.

Andras Riedlmayer, a Harvard University librarian and expert in this field, recalls an incident that took place in the Kosovar town of Peja/Pec.

I was told about an incident in 1998, when, as the villages in the surrounding Kosovo countryside were in flames, a group of Wahhabi missionaries—both Arabs and their Kosovar acolytes—came to town and tried to impose their own way of praying (the locals said it involved some "odd" body movements).

When the Wahhabis took out sledgehammers and set about smashing the 17th century gravestones in the garden of Peja's ancient Defterdar Mosque, angry local residents beat them up and chased them out of town. I was shown the damaged gravestones, beautifully carved with floral motifs and verses from Qur'an. That was in the late summer of 1998. Six months later, in the spring of 1999, Serb paramilitaries came and burned down the mosque. Unlike the fundamentalist missionaries, they were not interested in the gravestones.

This sort of hard-shell outlook can scarcely appeal to the nationalistic Albanians, who, like their Serb adversaries, consider their graves to be proof of their claim on Kosovo. But fundamentalist proscriptions go on and on. They do not like music, except for the drum. They do not accept Sufism, or mysticism, as a part of Islam. Both of these strictures run counter to Balkan Muslim traditions.

Balkan Muslims are especially devoted to a practice that drives Wahhabis to fury: *mawlid*, or, as it is locally called, *mevlud*, the commemoration of Mohammed's birth. To the fundamentalists, celebrating the prophet's birthday smacks of the Christian-style worship of Jesus. Abdussalam Chouia, a leading spokesman for the so-called Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR), a body which has spent considerable time harassing the American media over the very use of such terms as "Islamic fundamentalist,"

professed not even to know what *mevlud* is. "It isn't part of Islam," he insisted.

CAIR members are, to put it delicately, masters at twisting words. The very idea of an organization concerned with "American-Islamic relations," as if all Americans agreed on Islamic issues, as if Muslim citizens of the U.S. were not Americans, and as if the Islamic world were united in a supposed confrontation with America, is absurdly presumptuous. But CAIR has succeeded in intimidating numerous American newspaper editors into a form of political correctness that involves coddling Palestinian and other extremists under the pretext that "American bigotry" threatens Muslims.

In Bosnia-Herzegovina, many Islamic officials dislike fundamentalist activities but are reluctant to denounce them. The Bosnians are avid for the money. Only a few local Sufis have strongly criticized Wahhabi missionizing, arguing that the long presence of Sufi spiritualism in the Balkans is incompatible with fundamentalist fanaticism. In the end, Balkan Muslims are desperate to be viewed as European, and submission to the will of the Wahhabis will certainly do nothing to advance that agenda.

Kosovo Albanian Muslims have been more forthright in airing their irritabilities on this issue. After all, they do not need the money. The Kosovars have a large emigration that supports their various reconstructive activities, and, in addition, the Kosovo Albanians are far more enterprising than the Bosnians. This is also an incentive for the Kosovars to express greater independence from those in the international community who seek to use a kind of "aid blackmail" to get the Albanians to do what they want. For example, Albanians are inclined to rebuild their homes themselves, rather than, as is the Bosnian habit, wait for the UN or Europe or the U.S. to do it for them.

In one of the more surprising recent developments in Kosovo, the fundamentalists came under verbal fire from the Kosovapress news agency, universally considered to be the media arm of the Kosovo Liberation Army. Kosova press declared:

For more than a century civilized countries have separated religion from the state. [However], we now see attempts not only in Kosovo but everywhere Albanians live to introduce religion into public schools. . . .Supplemental courses for children have been set up by foreign Islamic organizations who hide behind assistance programs. Some radio stations. . .now offer nightly broadcasts in Arabic, which nobody understands and which lead many to ask, are we in an Arab country? It is time for Albanian mosques to be separated from Arab connections and for Islam to be developed on the basis of Albanian culture and customs.

Dr. Rexhep Boja, president of the mainstream Islamic Community of Kosovo, expressed himself similarly, stating boldly that Albanian Muslims had followed their faith for more than five hundred years and did not need anybody to teach them how to be Muslims or how to decorate their mosques.

Nevertheless, the Wahhabis are making much greater inroads in Kosovo than

in Bosnia-Herzegovina—notwithstanding Albanian tetchiness and the fashion addiction of Kosovar Albanian women, which makes *hijab* a rare sight indeed. Here, too, it has to do with elemental requirements. The Bosnians lack financial resources but they do not want for books or trained imams. The Kosovar Albanians do not need money but they have a thirst for books and a shortage of clerics. Many of the latter now go to the Saudis for training.

But the locals are not the only people concerned about the infiltration of Wahhabis in the Balkans. In Albania as well as Bosnia-Herzegovina and Kosovo, anxiety over the activities of Bin Ladin supporters has led American diplomats to entrench themselves behind high, thick walls observing exceptional security measures at their embassies and other diplomatic facilities.

At the end of March, a group of Saudi "aid workers" was roused by UN police from a building in Prishtina, accused of surveilling foreign vehicles, presumably in preparation for a terrorist attack. A representative of the Saudis, one Al Hadi, complained that the telephone in the building where they resided had been tapped.

The upshot of this situation was visible in the first week of April, when Prishtina saw a spectacle unheard of in Sarajevo. A massive fundamentalist "cultural program" was held in the local sports stadium to celebrate the beginning of the Muslim new year. Thousands of Albanian Muslims, young and old, walked away from the event happily clutching works in Albanian that professed Wahhabi fanaticism. In May, the familiar Saudi Joint Relief Committee laid the foundation of a multimillion dollar cultural, sports, and religious center in the Kosovo capital.

Is there a solution to this problem? Surely there is, but it is ignored by the foreign authorities in Kosovo. Albanians in the region include a considerable Catholic minority, with a distinguished cultural legacy, as well as thousands of followers of heterodox Islamic sects such as the Bektashis, who drink alcohol and follow a kind of Islamic Unitarianism.

In the city of Gjakova/Djakovica, for example, Bektashis and Catholics far outnumber Sunni Muslims. Both the former groups merit assistance in such matters as education, care of orphans, and the reconstruction of destroyed religious architecture. But the foreigners pay no attention to such details. They dismiss the Catholics contemptuously as too few, and know nothing of the Bektashis. Somewhere down the road, however, the consequences of such cultural obliviousness could be disastrous.

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